Assessing al-Qaeda from the Teachings of Ibn Taymiyya

Is There any Reason to Suggest, as the 9/11 Commission Seems to Do, that the Root of al-Qaeda's Terrorism Lies in the Teachings of Ibn Taymiyya?

Following the atrocities of September 11, 2001, the 9/11 Commission Report underlined "the threat posed by Islamist terrorism-especially the al-Qaeda network" and the impression that al-Qaeda's late leader "Usama Bin Laden…draw[s] on a long tradition of intolerance within one stream of Islam…from at least Ibn Taymiyyah" (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 2004: 362). This essay will critically assess the validity of the 9/11 Commission's assertion that the root of al-Qaeda's terrorism lies in the teachings of the thirteenth century Hanbali theologian and jurist, Ibn Taymiyya.

To do so, this essay will firstly outline the central tenets of Ibn Taymiyya's political theory, coupled with a contextual appreciation. This essay will then proceed to outline the similarities between Ibn Taymiyya's theory of *jihad* and the ideology and actions of al-Qaeda. Following this, the numerous discrepancies between Ibn Taymiyya's ideas and those of al-Qaeda will be highlighted. Finally, this essay will conclude by outlining the notion that portrayals of Ibn Taymiyya as "the ultimate trouble-maker" (Rapoport and Ahmed, 2010: 3) or "torchbearer of dissent" (Piscatori, 2006: xi) are based more on distortion, misinterpretation and even misquotation, than any firm ideological connection between Ibn Taymiyya and al-Qaeda.

Forced to flee from the Mongols at the age of six (Black, 2011: 158), Ibn Taymiyya escaped Haran to settle in Damascus under Mamluk rule. Significantly, this "refugee syndrome" (Sivan, 1983: 43) and the fact that he lived "under the shadow of the Mongol threat" (Doran, 2002: 179) may have coloured the political and legal theory he espoused throughout his life. Stemming from this, Ibn Taymiyya placed an emphasis on "the ritual uniformity of the Muslim community" (Heck, 2004: 117), necessitating "solidarity of good action and of piety" (Makari, 1983: 114), key to safeguarding the Islamic identity and contingent cohesiveness of the *umma* which had formerly been guaranteed by the caliphate.

However, despite the formal Mongol conversion to Islam, this 'ritual uniformity' was compromised by the fact that the Mongols continued to follow the "Yasa code of laws of Genghis Khan, instead of the Islamic law" (Esposito, 2002: 46). This was especially abhorrent to Ibn Taymiyya, taking into account "the central place he assigns to the *Sharī'a*" (Rosenthal, 1958: 52) and the symbiotic relationship between religion and state he propounded. On this basis, certain scholars have, albeit controversially and arguably inaccurately, asserted that the failure of the Mongols to correctly implement the *Sharī'a* rendered the Mongols, in Ibn Taymiyya's juristic opinion, "apostates and hence the lawful object of *jihad*" (Esposito, 2002: 46; Benjamin and Simon, 2002: 48; Knapp, 2003: 84). *Jihad*, in the case of Ibn Taymiyya, entailed a "decisive fight…against the disbelievers who are the enemies of Allah and his Messenger", (Ibn Taymiyya, 1966: 135) and was thus a righteous war.

Al-Qaeda, as an "Islamist terrorist network" (Jackson, 2007: 417), exists as a "loose network of relatively independent cells" (Martin, 2013: 8), generally seeking to advance a "global jihad" (Esposito, 2011: 237) through terrorist means. 'Terrorism' in this instance can be defined as "a strategy of violence designed to promote desired outcomes by instilling fear in the public at large" (Reich, 1998: 162). Threatening the West and Muslims in the Middle East, al-Qaeda's leaders have sought to legitimize their actions by drawing extensively on the teachings of Ibn

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Taymiyya, epitomized in Bin Laden's 1996 *fatwa: Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places*, which is littered with references to Ibn Taymiyya. Similarly, in his 1998*fatwa*, *Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders*, Bin Laden makes reference to "the shaykh al-Islam" and his assertion that "nothing is more sacred than belief except repulsing the enemy who is attacking religion and life". Taking these alleged influences into account, it is essential to outline the relative similarities between Ibn Taymiyya's philosophy and al-Qaeda's ideology in order to effectively assess whether the root of al-Qaeda's terrorism lies in the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya.

Firstly, Ibn Taymiyya's "elevation of jihad…to the rank of the canonical five pillars of Islam" (Simon, 2003: 19) arguably provides al-Qaeda's inspiration concerning the importance of waging *jihad*, apparently for the sake of Allah. "Jihad", according to Ibn Taymiyya, was "the best of all the voluntary good actions which man performs…better than the grand pilgrimage" (Ibn Taymiyya, 1966: 138), having himself "personally rallied resistance to a Mongol invasion of Syria" (Black, 2011: 158). Crucially, as Doran (2002: 180) highlights, the role played by the Mongols in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, is "in the view of al-Qaeda…currently played by Western civilization". Equating the Western threat to that of the Mongols, al-Qaeda have sought to purge the middle east of Western, especially American, military, cultural and political influence, all of which are portrayed as a threat to the existence of Islamic identity, precisely the identity which Ibn Taymiyya had sought to safeguard.

Additionally, Ibn Taymiyya's alleged legitimation of rebellion against Muslim rulers has also strongly influenced al-Qaeda's actions. Supposedly, he asserted that the Muslim Mongol rulers who did not correctly implement the *Shari'a* were *kufr* (apostates), not 'true Muslims', and therefore the lawful object of *jihad*. Bin Laden had drawn on this, for example, having viewed the Saudi rulers as apostates of Islam, due to their invitation of US military aid against Muslim Iraq, in effect legitimizing *jihad* against them. Ultimately, Al-Qaeda see "the United states as the neo-Mongol power lurking behind the apostate governments [in the Middle East] that they seek to topple" (Doran, 2002: 180), despite their facade status as Muslim governments.

Finally, it is also vital to note Ibn Taymiyya's understanding that, "if the enemy decided to attack the Muslims, then to repulse the enemy would become a personal duty on all" (Ibn Taymiyya, 1966: 146). This emphasis on *jihad* as a 'personal duty' incumbent upon all Muslims has been instrumental to al-Qaeda's terrorist activities, critically acting as a "useful recruiting device" (Barre, 2004: 7) and was reflected in Bin Laden's 1998 *fatwa* which portrayed the killing of Americans and their allies as "an individual duty for every Muslim" (Bin Laden, 1998).

However, despite these similarities, the actions and ideology of al-Qaeda diverge from the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya in several key areas. Despite al-Qaeda's aforementioned linkage between the apostasy of Muslim leaders and waging *jihad* against them, it is essential to note that Ibn Taymiyya did not explicitly propound waging *jihad* against apostate rulers. Whilst he did consider leaders who didn't apply the *Shari'a* to be apostates, and he did consider it the duty of all Muslims to wage a *jihad* against apostates, crucially Ibn Taymiyya never "explicitly made the connection between these two arguments" (Barre, 2004: 16). Even if he had made this link, Ibn Taymiyya explicitly forbade violent rebellion against established Muslim leaders. Accordingly, he held that "if those in authority did not comply wholly with the orders of Allah, you should, anyway, obey them" since "sixty years domination of a despotic ruler are better than one single night passed without a ruler" (Ibn Taymiyya, 1966: 188).

Additionally, he was the subject of a Mamluk *sultan*, and thus his principle anti-Mongol *fatwa* (frequently cited by Bin Laden) "was in fact a text for mobilization against a foreign power" (Michot, 2006: 50), further dispelling any notion that Ibn Taymiyya advocated a "theology of revolt" (Piscatori, 2006: xiv) against the apostasy of his own rulers. Another fundamental deviation between Ibn Taymiyya's teachings and the ideology of al-Qaeda lies in the principle of discrimination in warfare. Al-Qaeda's notion of *jihad* entails an offensive, indiscriminate, "self-sacrificial violence" (Heck, 2004: 117) aimed at both civilians and military groups alike. Conversely, in advocating a more defensive conception of *jihad*, Ibn Taymiyya took the principle of discrimination in warfare seriously, stressing that "those who do not constitute a defensive or offensive power, like the women, the children, the monks, old people, the blind, and the permanently disabled should not be fought" (Ibn Taymiyya, 1966: 140).

Furthermore, Ibn Taymiyya encouraged a defensive *jihad* "against ritual heterodoxy for the sake of Islamic identity" (Barre, 2004: 10), simultaneously emphasizing the importance of *maslaha* (the public interest), reflected in his

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emphasis on the detrimental consequences of rebellion and indiscriminate warfare highlighted above. Through their actions, al-Qaeda, on the contrary, have provoked a robust military and political response from the West, which has undoubtedly damaged any supposed 'Islamic identity' that al-Qaeda claim to defend, not to mention the *maslaha* which Ibn Taymiyya held as key to the *umma*'s preservation.

Lastly, Ibn Taymiyya's legal opinion was legitimized to a degree by the fact that his popular "support came from every segment of society" (Bori, 2010: 41), whilst he also understood *jihad* as something that could only be waged by "proper political authorities" (Barre, 2004: 17). Bin Laden, conversely, seemed to be "lacking the religious credentials necessary…for issuing authoritative legal opinions" (Gwynne, 2006: 83) on waging *jihad,* this lack of legitimacy only being intensified by the fact that only a tiny minority of Muslims support the ideas espoused by Bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Had al-Qaeda taken the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya seriously, they would have surely waited to wage their jihad until it was possible to do so under a recognized and established religious leader of the Islamic world (Barre, 2004: 17).

These fundamental variances do point towards a case of "political distortion" and "creative interpretation" (Sivan, 1983: 42) committed by al-Qaeda's leaders, reflective of a general tendency amongst Muslim "radicals [to inaccurately] call upon Ibn Taymiyya to authenticate their [primarily political] positions" (Rapoport and Ahmed, 2010: 4). This distortion was further exacerbated, as the Mardin Conference (2010) concluded in its 'New Mardin Declaration', through misquotation of Ibn Taymiyya's *Mardin Fatwa*. Ibn Taymiyya had been asked whether the city of Mardin was a "land of war" or a "land of peace", to which he answered that it constituted neither, rather it was a "third type of domain" in which "the Muslim shall be treated as he merits" and "the one who departs from the Law of Islam shall be combatted as he merits" (Ibn Taymiyya, 2006: 63-65).

However, a crucial misprint had corrupted the text from its original meaning: those who depart from the Law of Islam should not be "combatted" (*yuqātal*) as they merit but instead must be "treated" (*yu'āmal*) (Michot, 2011: 144-145) as they merit. Hence, his *Mardin fatwa* was "quite the opposite of a green light to the unleashing of general hostilities" (Michot, 2006: 26), yet the pivotal misprint had at least influenced, if not actually "was the basis of bin Laden's fatwa to kill Americans, and also to overthrow the house of Sa'ūd in Saudi Arabia" according to Hamza Yusuf Hanson (2010, cited in Michot, 2011: 150). Whilst Michot does view Hanson's assertion as somewhat exaggerated (Michot, 2011: 158) the 'New Mardin Declaration' did nevertheless highlight a crucial fact: that "Ibn Taymiyya is more often cited than understood, constantly evoked and not sufficiently studied" (Rapoport and Ahmed, 2010: 4), an offence that al-Qaeda are notably guilty of.

In conclusion, there is little reason to suggest that the root of al-Qaeda's terrorism lies in the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya. Al-Qaeda has consistently sought to authenticate and legitimize their acts of indiscriminate violence and terrorism by appealing to various canonical proofs, amongst these notably the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya. However, by alluding to his teachings, al-Qaeda fundamentally overlook the primacy that Ibn Taymiyya accorded to Islamic identity and his conception of *jihad* as a defensive struggle against ritual heterodoxy within the Islamic community (Barre, 2004: 10). By seeking to 'Mongolize' the governments of certain Muslim countries, al-Qaeda have disregarded the unique socio-historical context within which Ibn Taymiyya wrote, thus committing "the sin of (at least) anachronism…in tying their version of Ibn Taymiyya to modern circumstances" (Piscatori, 2006: xiv). Additionally, there remain vast discrepancies between Ibn Taymiyya and al-Qaeda's respective notions concerning the right of rebellion, discrimination in warfare and the significance of the 'public interest'. These serve to further highlight the distortion and wilful, or less wilful in the case of the misprinted *Mardin Fatwa*, misinterpretation of Ibn Taymiyya's teachings by al-Qaeda.

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